DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 659 CG 012 256

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TITLE Unemployment and the Family.
PUB DATE 13 Oct 77
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations (San Diego, California, October 12-15, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Decision Making; *Family Life; Family Relationship; Interpersonal Relationship; *Jobs; Literature Reviews; *Public Policy; Sex Role; *Social Influences; *Unemployment

ABSTRACT

The recent period of recession and high unemployment has led to increased public interest in the impact of unemployment on families. This paper reviews the available literature on unemployment and the family and relates it to current policy issues. Unemployment is found to be related to family functioning and stability, spending patterns, authority and decision making, and sex roles and the division of labor in the family. On the basis of previous research, it is suggested that research is needed to explore the joint effects of unemployment, social class, and wife employment on the family. In the development of policy, the following suggestions are made: (1) the occupational role of individual workers needs to be integrated with family needs for an adequate income; and (2) a comprehensive policy combining full employment with an income maintenance program based on family need should be developed to provide economic security for American families. (Author)

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# Unemployment and the Family*

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*A paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, October 13, 1977 in San Diego. The preparation of this paper was supported in part by a grant from the William T. Grant Foundation.

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## Abstract

The recent period of recession and high unemployment has led to increased public interest in the impact of unemployment on families. This paper reviews the available literature on unemployment and the family and relates it to current policy issues. Unemployment is related to family functioning and stability, spending patterns, authority and decision making, and sex roles and the division of labor in the family. On the basis of previous research, it is suggested that research is needed to explore the joint effects of unemployment, social class, and wife employment on the family. In the development of policy, the occupational role of individual workers needs to be integrated with family needs for an adequate income. Thus a comprehensive policy combining full employment with an income maintenance program based on family need should be developed to provide economic security for American families.

Unemployment and the Family

The recent period of recession and high unemployment has led to increased public interest in the impact of unemployment on families. Joseph Califano (1976: 1) concluded his analysis of American families as follows: "The central conclusion is that the most severe threat to family life stems from unemployment and lack of adequate income." Arthur Burns (Silk, 1975: 34) has stated, "When we reach these levels of unemployment . . . I get a little emotional. It's a devastating experience when the head of a household loses the esteem of the members of his family. The worst of unemployment is what it does to the family." Despite the important policy implications of these statements, the data to support these conclusions are sparse. The purpose of this paper is to pull together the limited data and analyses available on unemployment and the family and to relate them to current policy issues.

Before doing this, it is necessary to place research on unemployment and the family in a broader context. Work is one of the crucial social roles in any society. In addition to the basic function of economic production, work has taken on broader meanings to individuals and society. The performance of a work role provides a basic social location for individuals. Work in American society provides a major source of activity, social contacts and social integration, income, and a sense of accomplishment.

Individuals in different social classes and with varied employment histories indicate similar values regarding the importance of being able to work and the desire to have a worthwhile productive job. Welfare as a desirable alternative to work is consistently rejected (Davidson and Gaitz, 1974; Goodwin, 1971, 1972; Kaplan and Tausky, 1974).

Work roles are also crucial to the family in several respects. The joint occupational-earner role concept makes explicit the links between the economic system and the family. The occupational role in the economy leads to the production of goods and services for economic rewards. In addition, the earner role indicates that the income earned is used by the family as resources for consumption and for the location of the family in the stratification system. The general social class status, prestige, and standard of living of the family have generally been based on the success and occupational achievement of the male (Rodman and Safilios-Rothschild, 1968). In addition, the social class status of the family is related to most areas of family life. For example, Scanzoni (1970) has analyzed several expressive aspects of marriage in relation to the position of the husband in the opportunity structure. Studies of lower-class families, especially among blacks, have pointed out the extreme problems males have in playing a satisfactory role in their families due to difficulties encountered in the occupational world (Greenfield, 1966; Liebow, 1967; Rainwater, 1974; Rodman, 1971). Others have indicated the importance of the stability of the work role to the family although total work histories have not been systematically studied in

relation to the family. Furstenberg (1974: 355) in his analysis of work and the family concludes that "economic uncertainty brought on by unemployment and marginal employment is a principal reason why family relations deteriorate." The importance of a career route is basic to his analysis--"I contend that it is the absence of a work career that has the most unsettling effects on family life" (Furstenberg, 1974: 354). Unemployment is one major factor in the stability of an individual's work history and career.

The analysis of the literature on unemployment and the family draws on research conducted during and since the depression of the thirties. Much of it comes from a small number of depression era studies with small samples of families, mostly working class, in which the husband was unemployed for a relatively long period of time. These studies are limited by the level of methodological development at the time and by the uncertain relevance of the findings to current social conditions. Time limitations require that this analysis be very brief. We will consider the effects of unemployment on the family with regard to four major areas of family life--family functioning and stability, spending patterns, authority and decision making, and sex roles and the division of labor in the family.

Studies during the depression dealing with family functioning found that adjustment varied by length of unemployment and with the type of family organization before unemployment. Bakke (1940) outlined several stages in the cycle of family readjustment including momentum stability, unstable equilibrium, disorganization, experimental readjustment, and

permanent readjustment. This cycle of family readjustment is similar in its basic form to the stages of psychological adjustment discovered in the depression (Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld, 1938; Zawadzki and Lazarsfeld, 1935) and more recently (Powell and Driscoll, 1973). Cavan and Ranck (1938) found that family disorganization during unemployment was related to the level of organization before unemployment. Families which were well organized before unemployment tended to remain relatively organized during unemployment while relatively disorganized families tended to become more disorganized during unemployment. A well organized family was defined as a "family with a high degree of unity and reciprocal functioning" (Cavan, 1959: 141). This analysis is supported by the work of Angell (1936) who studied families experiencing apparently lasting income losses of at least 25 percent. He focused on the role of adaptability and integration in the reaction of these families to their income loss. Integrated and adaptable families were best able to resist pressure toward changes in family relationships while integrated but unadaptable families were vulnerable to changes. Unintegrated families were found to have insufficient structure to resist pressures and were likely to react unpredictably. The significance of the similar results is increased because Cavan and Ranck studied working-class families while Angell studied middle-class families. Research also indicates that some previous experience with unemployment and not blaming the unemployed person for his status facilitate family adjustment (Angell, 1936;

Bakke, 1940; Cavan, 1959; Furstenberg, 1974; Rainwater, 1974; Stouffer and Lazarsfeld, 1937).

Research relating unemployment to family stability during the depression is limited by the nonreporting of desertions (Furstenberg, 1974). Case studies indicate limited numbers of marital separations and divorces during unemployment (Bakke, 1940; Cavan, 1959). These studies also found increased integration among some families. Recently, however, Sawhill et al. (1975) found that substantial unemployment is strongly related to marital dissolution.

Patterns of spending during unemployment have been studied relatively extensively over the years perhaps because recent research has emphasized economic consequences of unemployment. During the depression Bakke (1940) analyzed spending behavior during the cycle of family readjustment. During momentum stability most expenditures were maintained except for some luxuries, recreation, and social contact expenditures. During unstable equilibrium cuts were still not in proportion to the income and resources of the family due to the use of credit although some essential items were replaced with lower cost alternatives, clothing was not replaced, and recreation, social contact, and social front expenditures were reduced. During disorganization credit was at the limit and expenditures were reduced in all areas. More recent research indicates cuts in food, clothing, transportation, and recreation (e.g., Nicholson and Corson, 1976; Sheppard,

Ferman, and Faber, 1960). Savings are used by many while some borrow money and in some cases other family members go to work. Elder (1974) stressed the importance of maintaining a front and attempting to reduce status loss among middle-class families in his study. Wife employment, obtaining income from relatives and boarders, and public assistance as a last resort were relatively more common among the economically deprived in the working class. Wife employment was also more common in families with income loss without unemployment, i.e., where wives worked in family businesses to save expenses. Conrad (1939) found laborers more likely than businessmen to cut down on food expenditures and to have activities limited by lack of clothing. Members of both groups, however, cut down on clothing and recreation expenses and needed money to pay debts.

Depression research indicates an increase in the authority of the wife and in her decison-making role during the husband's unemployment (Bakke, 1940; Cavan, 1959). Komarovsky (1940) reported three types of authority loss for unemployed husbands: crystallization of an inferior status, breakdown of coercive control, and weakened authority of a husband over a loving wife. Authority based on economic need or fear was most likely to be weakened while authority based on love and respect was least likely to be affected by unemployment. Thus as in Cavan and Ranck's (1938) study, unsatisfactory patterns existing before unemployment became more problematic during unemployment. Elder (1974) found that decision making dominance by the wife was highest in families with both economic

deprivation (income loss) and unemployment. This relationship held equally for middle and working-class families.

Authority and discipline problems with children have also been reported in the families of the unemployed. Komarovsky (1940) found that fathers were more likely to lose authority with teenage children than with their wives or younger children. Reasons for the higher loss among adolescents include lack of money to use as a means of control, changes in the fathers' behavior, and the employment of the teenagers. Bakke (1940) reported discipline problems during periods of unstable equilibrium and disorganization including increased use of arbitrary authority by parents, children's resentment of their earner role, and the lack of expenditures made by parents for reward and punishment.

Recent research has found family violence and child abuse, which some interpret as an aspect of power (Goode, 1971), to be related to unemployment and work role difficulties (Justice and Duncan, 1975; O'Brien, 1971; Straus, 1974).

Little work has been done on the relationship between unemployment and sex roles and the division of labor in the family. Komarovsky (1940) and Bakke (1940) suggested that patriarchal mores and rigid family roles might account for some of the variation in reactions to unemployment. Voydanoff (1963) in a more recent study found that the morale of unemployed men was lower among those with traditional sex role ideologies. Angell (1936) referred to traditional sex role norms as one aspect of unadaptability in families.

Bakke (1940) found that the unemployed men in his study did not assume additional household tasks during unemployment although some did more work in areas where they had previously worked, such as gardening and household repairs. When the wife took on paid employment the shift of chores was toward the children not the husband. Part of the shift in decision making toward the wife included the added responsibility for managing the family finances. Elder (1974) also found changes in the role of children when the wife became employed outside the home. Boys were more likely to take on part-time employment while girls did more household work. These changes were found in families experiencing income loss in both the middle and working classes.

These limited data on unemployment and the family need to be supplemented by very brief consideration of previous research on social class, wife employment, and the family. Several indices of marital happiness, adjustment, and family problem solving are directly related to social class measures (Hicks and Platt, 1970; Scanzoni, 1970; Straus, 1968; Tallman and Miller, 1974). In addition, measures of marital instability are directly related to income (Bane, 1976; Cutright, 1971; Sawhill et al., 1975). The resource theory of marital power proposes that the power of the husband relative to the wife is related to the economic resources that the man can provide for his family (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Rodman, 1972; Scanzoni, 1970). Sex role ideology and role behavior are more traditional and segregated in the working and lower classes (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Komarovsky, 1962;

Rainwater, 1965) which are also the social classes in which women are most likely to work from necessity. These general results point out the importance of studying the joint effects of unemployment, social class, and wife employment on the family. This has not been done.

On the basis of the research reviewed, however, it is possible to hypothesize that the effects of unemployment on the family will vary according to the social class of the family and the work history of the wife while the husband is unemployed. For example, since the previous organization of families will differ by social class, effects of unemployment should also vary by class if the results of the depression studies are valid. This previous research provides contrasting hypotheses regarding the relative effects of unemployment on the family in the middle versus the working and lower classes. One hypothesis is that unemployment in some working-class families and in lower-class families exacerbates situations that are generally less satisfactory in terms of organization, happiness, and stability. Limited research on the middle class indicates that, especially in terms of the effects of status loss, middle-class families have relatively severe reactions to unemployment, i.e., "the higher they are, the harder they fall" (Braginsky and Braginsky, 1975; Elder, 1974; Goodchilds and Smith, 1963; Powell and Driscoll, 1973). Elder (1974), who included middle and working-class families in his study, found support for both hypotheses, i.e., the effects of income loss and unemployment were greater on working-class families in some areas and on middle-class

families in others. Other effects were similar in both classes. Much more research is needed to explore the similarities and differences in family reactions to unemplomeat by social class.

The concept of wife employment also needs to be broadened in relation to research on unemployment and the family. For example, the impact of wife unemployment on the family has not been studied. This is especially relevant now since many families consider it necessary for two people to work outside the home in order to maintain their desired standard of living. The impact on the family when middle-class women go to work because of unemployment in the family also is not known; previous work on the necessity of wife employment has focused on working and lower-class women.

Now that we have reviewed the available research on the effects of unemployment on the family, what can we say that is relevant to current policy issues? Policy analysis in this area is complicated by a dilemma in what we referred to earlier as the occupational-earner role. The occupational role provides labor for the production of goods and services in the economy in return for pay to individual workers on the basis of productivity and the market value of their services. In the earner role, however, this income is used to support the individual and his family, i.e., individual earnings become family income. Many incomes are adequate to support an individual worker but are not adequate to support the worker's family (Bell, 1975).

Thus the adequacy of an income for a family depends on the size of the family as well as the amount of the income. The level of adequacy of total family income is also influenced by the number of people in a family who are employed.

This dilemma is related to the overlap between social insurance and income maintenance policies. For example, unemployment insurance is designed to replace earnings lost through unemployment by providing earned benefits based on the worker's previous level of earnings. Unemployment insurance does not cover all types of unemployment, however, because of various eligibility criteria (The Economic Situation, 1976). The lack of a comprehensive income maintenance program based on family need has led to the incorporation of family need criteria into social insurance programs such as unemployment insurance and social security, e.g., varying benefits according to the cost of living and family size and composition and extending unemployment insurance during periods of sluggish labor market activity (Bane, 1976; Harris, 1977).

How can policies be developed which reconcile the occupational role of an individual worker with family needs for an adequate income and which also clarify the distinction between social insurance and income maintenance? For example, should job programs create more jobs by providing incomes large enough to support an individual but not a family or should fewer jobs be provided which can support families of various sizes? The research reviewed here indicates that people want to work and that they also want to

earn enough to support their families. Many men, especially those with traditional sex role norms, feel their work role performance is inadequate if they can not support their family at a standard of living acceptable to them. More specific research on the combined effects of unemployment, class, and wife employment on the family would provide more specific data in this area. Research on the effects of varying levels of employment stability over the work history is also needed.

The research reviewed here and findings of several recent policy studies (Keniston and The Carnegie Council on Children, 1977; National Research Council, 1976; Work in America, 1973) indicate that a comprehensive employment and income policy is needed to provide for families and children. Full employment, e.g., providing stable career-oriented employment for all men and women wanting to work, needs to be combined with a comprehensive income maintenance program based on family need, e.g., guaranteed annual income, negative income tax, or tax credits. Since previous research indicates that these income maintenance programs do not inhibit the incentive to work to a significant extent (Lampman, 1976; Shore and Scott, 1973; Wright and Wright, 1975), the two approaches complement each other in providing economic security to families. The major task is to design a policy combining these elements with reference to different employment patterns, income levels, and family sizes and types. This task awaits further research and analysis as well as the development of a major policy initiative by the Federal Government. President Carter's proposed welfare plan may be a first step in this direction.

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